

## **West Point Graduate, Decorated Vietnam Veteran, Assumes Command of the United States Department of Veterans' Affairs**



### ***The Honorable R. James Nicholson***

R. James "Jim" Nicholson was nominated by President George W. Bush to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs on December 9, 2004, and was unanimously confirmed by the Senate on January 26, 2005. He was sworn into office on February 1, 2005.

As Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Mr. Nicholson is the principal advocate for veterans in the U.S. government, ensuring that they receive the care, support, recognition and dignity they deserve for their service to our country. He also directs the Department of Veterans Affairs, the federal government's second largest Cabinet Department, responsible for a nationwide system of health care services, benefits programs, and national cemeteries for America's Veterans. With a budget of more than \$69 billion for fiscal year 2005, VA employs approximately 230,000 people at hundreds of VA medical centers, clinics, nursing homes, benefits offices, and national cemeteries throughout the country.

Prior to his nomination, Mr. Nicholson served as U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, a position he held since 2001, where he became a well-known advocate in Rome for the elevation of human dignity, giving special emphasis to human trafficking, religious freedom, starvation and bio-tech food, HIV-AIDS, and international terrorism. He was knighted by Pope John Paul II in October 2003 for this work representing the U.S. to the Vatican.

Mr. Nicholson was born in 1938 and grew up on a tenant farm in northwest Iowa in a family of seven children. He is a 1961 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. He served eight years on active duty as a paratrooper and Ranger-qualified Army officer, then 22 years in the Army Reserve, retiring with the rank of colonel. While serving in Vietnam, he earned the Bronze Star Medal, Combat Infantryman Badge, the Meritorious Service

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Medal, Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry and two Air Medals. Mr. Nicholson earned a master's degree from Columbia University in New York, and a law degree from the University of Denver. He practiced law in Denver, specializing in real estate, municipal finance and zoning law. In 1978 he founded Nicholson Enterprises, Inc., a developer of planned residential communities, and in 1987 he bought Renaissance Homes, which became an award-winning builder of quality custom homes.

In January 1986, Mr. Nicholson was elected committeeman from Colorado for the Republican National Committee (RNC). In 1993 he was elected vice-chairman of the RNC, and in January 1997, he was elected chairman of the RNC, where he served for four years, through the elections of 2000.

Mr. Nicholson is married to the former Suzanne Marie Ferrell of Highland Falls, New York, who is an accomplished artist. They are the parents of three adult children.

## NETWORK LEADERS RECOGNIZED

**Stan Johnson**, Medical Center Director at the Tomah VA Medical Center, has been named the recipient of the 2004 American Hospital Association (AHA) Federal Health Care Executive Award for Excellence.

This National award recognizes one senior federal career health care executive who has provided distinguished service through significant leadership or innovative achievements that have contributed substantially to the mission of the federal health care system. Mr. Johnson was selected from a field of highly accomplished colleagues representing the Departments of the Navy, Air Force, Public Health Service, and Veterans Health Administration.

Mr. Johnson is recognized for his leadership, innovation and creativity, the many accomplishments of the Tomah VA Medical Center, and for his role in multiple VISN initiatives. He is credited with achieving significant improvements in efficiency, access, quality, and revenue generation.

Mr. Johnson received the 2004 AHA Federal Health Care Executive Award for Excellence at a special

ceremony during the American College of Healthcare Executives Congress, in Chicago March 14 – 17.



*Stan Johnson, Tomah Medical Center Director, with his AHA Award. Also shown are Renee Oshinski, Acting Network Director & Max Lewis, Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health.*

On March 26, 2005, **Jack G. Hetrick**, Hines VA Hospital Director, was recognized for having advanced to the status of Fellow in the American College of Healthcare Executives during its 71<sup>st</sup> Annual Convocation.

The advancement of a candidate to Fellow is accomplished only after presenting to the Credentials Committee evidence of professional growth and competence in the field. These factors are demonstrated by an individual's leadership in health and community affairs at the local, state, or national level; by participation in programs of continuing professional education; and by submission of a comprehensive Fellow project relating to health services management.

## CARES UPDATE

### ***Partnership with Catholic Charities***

Groundbreaking for a residential center on the south side of Chicago that will house up to 141 homeless veterans is planned in April by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago. The project is part of a national pilot program to develop transitional housing to serve chronically homeless and mentally ill veterans.

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The building will be constructed at 7750 South Emerald Avenue in Chicago, which is the site of the former St. Leo Church Parish, and is expected to be completed in spring 2006. It will offer 141 studio apartments, each with its own kitchen and bathroom, in a building with common recreational and meeting areas that offers easy access to public transportation, grocery and other stores, pharmacies and restaurants.

In partnership with Catholic Charities, the Jesse Brown VAMC plans to open a new community based outpatient clinic located one block away at 7731 South Halsted Street. The 16,000 square-foot building, encompassing the clinic on the ground floor and a Veterans Readjustment Counseling Center on the second floor, will offer primary care and specialty services, including dental care, mental health counseling, job training, a computer lab and offices for the Veterans Benefit Administration and Department of Labor.

While announcing the groundbreaking, the Reverend Michael Boland, Catholic Charities Administrator, said, "The campus at St. Leo's will offer not only affordable housing and a clinic for veterans, but also a comprehensive range of social services including job training and placement, supportive services and counseling with the goal of increasing the level of self-sufficiency for veterans in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago."

"This project has become the embodiment of what a faith-based and community initiative can accomplish in partnership with government and the private sector," he said.



*Former Secretary Ed Derwinski is joined by former JBVAMC Director Richard Citron, and William Moorman, Acting Assistant Secretary for Management, in announcing the initiative to provide transitional housing for homeless veterans in Chicago.*



*Participating in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new interim auditorium at the Jesse Brown VAMC is (from left) Paula Steward, Associate Director for Patient Care Services, Stan Johnson, Acting Director, Michelle Blakely, Associate Director for Operations and Lewis Coulson, M.D. The temporary building is replacing the medical center's auditorium that is being razed to make room for construction of the inpatient bed tower. The inpatient addition is expected to be completed in spring 2007.*

## NETWORK NEWS

### HINES

Hines has hosted visits by several state and local politicians, met with new VA Secretary Nicholson, and taken possession of the new Spinal Cord Injury and Blind Rehabilitation Center buildings.

State Representative Careen Gordon, whose district covers two of the Hines CBOCs in Kendall County, visited Hines first. Ms. Gordon met with senior leaders at Hines and took a tour of the facility. She was favorably impressed with the facility and said that she had received positive feedback from her constituents about the care and staff at the facility.

Next, Congressman Daniel Lipinski, who took office this January, visited the facility. The Congressman also met with facility leadership for a briefing about the facility and then toured the Primary Care Clinic on the third floor. Congressman Lipinski walked

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around greeting and shaking hands with patients and staff. He and his staff commented on the great working relationship they have with Hines and the wonderful work that is done at the facility.

Finally, Congressman Danny Davis visited Hines during Black History Month. Congressman Davis had visited the facility a couple of years ago. This time during his visit, he met with Jack Hetrick, facility director, and spoke of the many wonderful stories he hears about the care at Hines. He even remarked that one of his good friends had received care here and thought it was “top notch.”

After meeting with Mr. Hetrick, Congressman Davis served as the keynote speaker at the Hines Black History Month program in the auditorium. He gave an uplifting speech to an auditorium packed with enthusiastic Hines employees. His visit to Hines was a resounding success.

VA Secretary R. James “Jim” Nicholson visited Illinois for the first time a few weeks ago to participate in meetings in Yorkville and Elgin, both areas served by Hines Community Based Outpatient Clinics. These meetings, which were sponsored by Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, were designed for veterans in the area to be able to share their concerns directly with the new VA Secretary. The meetings were covered extensively in the news media.



*Secretary Nicholson with Speaker of the House, J. Dennis Hastert.*

The Secretary was only in town a matter of hours and didn't have time to visit the facility. However, Hines and VISN leadership attended the meetings and met the new Secretary. The feedback from veterans served by CBOCs in the area was very positive.



*Secretary Nicholson at the podium with Network & Hines Staff.*

Another major development at Hines has been the completion of the new Spinal Cord Injury and Blind Rehabilitation Centers. The new buildings were officially completed a few weeks ago and Hines staff is putting the finishing touches on the buildings and working on some last-minute details prior to the move of patients and staff. The new buildings will be officially dedicated in a ceremony in May. Hines staff and patients are enthusiastically awaiting the move to the new buildings. Invitations to the building dedications will be sent out in the next couple of weeks.

Hines has also been the subject of numerous media inquiries in the past couple of weeks. This March marks the two-year anniversary of the conflict in Iraq and Chicago-area media are extensively covering support to Iraqi veterans. So far Hines social workers Ed Klama, Rob Smith and Phil Elbaum from the Mental Health Service line, have been the subject of news interviews about their work with Iraqi veterans returning with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Joe Rio, Chief of Patient Administration and Ivy Bryant, Hines' Iraqi Freedom Coordinator, have also done commendable jobs in news interviews over the past couple of weeks.



## IRON MOUNTAIN



**Terry E. Taylor** was appointed the Associate Director of the VA Medical Center in Iron Mountain on January 9, 2005. Her appointment follows the retirement of Paul G. Noury, who served as Associate Director of the Iron Mountain facility from 1998 to 2004.

A native of Maryland, she attended the University of Colorado, obtaining a bachelors degree in 1979. She completed pre-med studies at Metropolitan State College and Arapahoe Community College in Colorado from 1990-1992, and in 1993 received her Diploma from Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center and School of Health Sciences in Medical Technology.

Ms. Taylor transferred to the Iron Mountain VAMC from an Acting Associate Director position at the VAMC in Roseburg, Oregon. Her VA career also included assignments as Acting Chief Financial Officer, Acting Performance Support Manager, Data Manager, Diagnostic & Therapeutic Service Manager, and Supervisory Medical Technologist.

She is a graduate of the VA's Healthcare Leadership Institute and recently completed the Executive Career Field (ECF) development program. She is a member of the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE).

Ms. Taylor has three children; two daughters who are attending college, and a son who is serving with the U.S. Army, presently stationed in Iraq.

## JESSE BROWN

### ***JBVAMC Exceeds CFC Goal***

Employees at the Jesse Brown VAMC not only met their Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) goal, they shattered it. Over \$70,000 was contributed by staff, exceeding the \$54,164 CFC goal by almost 30 percent. Congratulations to Agency Campaign Coordinators Myra Celestin, Nursing Service; Teesha Easley, Director's Office; Angielene Owens, Surgical Service; Johnnie Minefee, Nutrition & Food Service; Tom Sifner, Director's Office and David Simon, Engineering Service, as well as Loaned Executive Ann Pressley, Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation Service.

### ***JB Recognition Award "Points" to High Achievers***

A new incentive and recognition program - the Employee Point Program - has been established by the Employer of Choice Committee at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center. It provides staff with an opportunity to receive time-off awards for achievements or activities completed by July 15.

Employees accrue points by participating in wellness, volunteerism, educational and self-development programs, as well as various other activities offered at the medical center. Staff members have been given point-tracking forms to document the points they accrue.

After the forms have been submitted to the Employee Award and Recognition Sub-committee for review and tabulation, the value of the points will be announced at the annual All-Employee Recognition Ceremony in late summer.

JBVAMC is also initiating monthly celebrations for staff members approved for an award or recognition during the previous month, including special contribution, years of service and the Starfish (You Make A Difference) Awards for excellent customer service. Eligible employees will be invited, along with a guest of their choice, to attend the monthly celebration ceremonies and accept the award presented to them by the Medical Center Director.

To honor employees for providing extra efforts, the medical center is also establishing "on-the-spot"

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recognition, known as the GEM Award, for **G**oing the **E**xtra **M**ile. These will be presented to deserving staff, along with a bouquet of balloons, in the employee's work area.

Associate Director Michelle Blakely, co-chair of the Employer of Choice Committee said, "Many of our employees deserve to be honored for acts of service they provide daily on behalf of their co-workers and the patients we serve. With this wide range of incentive awards, we can give recognition to all of our deserving employees, from those who provide major contributions that significantly impact our mission, to those who provide an act of kindness that brightens the day for one of our veterans or staff."

### **Stan Johnson Named Acting Director at JBVAMC**

Stan Johnson, Director of the Tomah VA Medical Center, was appointed Acting Director of the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, effective February 22. He replaced Jack Hetrick, Hines VAH Director, who had been serving as Acting Director at JBVAMC since November 18, 2004.



*Stan Johnson (left) introduces himself to Manzoor Ahmad, Project Engineer, during a "meet and greet" session held prior to his first town hall meeting with staff at the Jesse Brown VAMC.*

Johnson has served as Director of Tomah for over 10 years. Previously, he held positions as Associate Director at the VA medical centers in Richmond, Virginia; Asheville, North Carolina and Grand

Junction, Colorado. He completed the Associate Director Training program at the Iowa City VAMC in 1988. Prior to joining VA, he served in the U.S. Navy from 1972 to 1976 as a hospital corpsman.

Nathan Geraths, Director, of Madison VAH, is chairing a search committee to review applicants for the position.

### **Field Leadership Development Program**



A total of 24 staff members graduated in December from the first Field Leadership Development Program (FLDP) held at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center. Each of the participants was assigned a mentor and had to complete a facility-based project as a requirement for the program. The second annual FLDP was held in March.

### **JB Staff Accept National Nutrition Month Challenge**

A total of 117 staff members accepted the "Hours for Pounds" employee weight loss challenge and weighed in with Nutrition & Food Service staff on March 1<sup>st</sup>, as the Jesse Brown VAMC kicked off a series of National Nutrition Month activities.

The five employees that lost the largest percentage of body weight by the end of the month were each awarded an hour of leave for every pound they lost. If they keep the poundage off for 30 days (or lose additional weight), they will be awarded an additional five hours of leave.

Other Nutrition Month activities included a food drive to benefit the Veterans Resource Center food

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pantry, a Nutrition Fair and a "Better for You" bake-off in which staff, patients and visitors were invited to submit healthier versions of their favorite recipes to lower the amount of saturated fat, increase fiber or lower the amount of sodium. Prizes for the bake-off were provided by the medical center's Canteen Service.



*Nutrition & Food Service staff sold popcorn (popped in sunflower oil, which is much lower in saturated fat than the coconut oil typically used for popcorn) to raise funds earmarked for National Nutrition Month activities.*

## MADISON

### ***Madison Wins VA Environmental Excellent Award***

The employees of the William S. Middleton Memorial Hospital in Madison Wisconsin exercise an environmental consciousness that reduces costs as well as the hospital's impact on the community's ecosystem through an award-winning program of Regulated Medical Wastes reduction. The facility was recently selected as the winner of VA's "Environmental Excellence Award" in the category of Waste/Pollution Prevention. This nomination has also been advanced by VA for competition in the 2005 "White House Closing the Circle Awards." Additional VA "Environmental Excellence Award" winners were also selected in the categories of Recycling, Environmental Management Systems, and Sustainable Design/Green Buildings. The VA "Environmental Excellence Awards" Ceremony will be held on April 21 in VA Central Office.

This award is the culmination of a multi-year process improvement effort by the hospital. In 1995 sixty percent of the facility's waste stream was incinerated as Regulated Medical Wastes. A concerted effort was made to improve source segregation of waste types and the substitution of "disposable" with "reusable" items. This resulted in a marked reduction of regulated medical waste generated, to where only 22 percent of the waste generated was Regulated Medical Waste in 1997. As a result of this achievement, the hospital was awarded the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' "Prevention, Environment and Prosperity" award in December of that year.



*VAH Madison Environmental and Support Service's staff member Donald Jungbluth removing "red bag" Regulated Medical Wastes and "clear bag" general wastes from a typical surgery case. Improvements in staff source segregation (putting only items that meet the defined criteria Regulated Medical Wastes into red bags), the substitution of disposable items with reusable items, and alternative treatment of surgical suction fluids have contributed to Madison's award winning program.*

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With the guidance and support of a multi-disciplinary Environment of Care Committee, this process improvement activity set more and more ambitious goals for Regulated Medical Waste Reduction. In 2002 this problematic waste type was reduced to nine percent of the total amount discarded by the hospital. By 2004 the facility was able to reduce the Regulated Medical Wastes level to 7.53% of the total waste stream, making it one of the most effective programs of any hospital in the country. Reducing the amount of Regulated Medical Wastes which generated not only reduces the need for incineration, which can produce dangerous toxins such as dioxins; it also saves the facility money due to the disposal costs for Regulated Medical Wastes which are more than 13 times the cost of disposing of general unregulated waste.

Congratulations to the environmentally concerned staff of the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital on the achievement of this noteworthy award.

### ***Farrell to Complete Medical School Deanship in 2005***

Dr. Philip M. Farrell, who has served as dean of the University of Wisconsin Medical School for more than a decade, announced his intention not to seek reappointment after completing his current five-year term in December 2005. He will also relinquish his position as UW-Madison vice chancellor for medical affairs, a responsibility he assumed in 2001.

The 60-year-old pediatric pulmonologist plans to concentrate on research, clinical practice and public health initiatives related to cystic fibrosis (CF), a life-threatening respiratory illness that begins during infancy.

"For me, it's been a blessing to have had this long-term leadership opportunity following my chairmanship of pediatrics. With the majority of my UW-Madison faculty years devoted to a combination of intensive administration and academic endeavors, I'm now looking forward to a time in my life that allows me to truly focus on my passion for improving children's health through research discoveries and their application," Farrell says.

## **MILWAUKEE**

### ***To improve care...Using patient tracers***

Last year the Milwaukee VA Medical Center started unannounced internal reviews of the care and services provided to individual patients using the new tracer methodology developed by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO). This methodology represents a distinct change in the way the JCAHO conducts accreditation surveys.

In the past, JCAHO surveyors conducted group interviews of staff and visited medical center divisions to ask general questions about the delivery of care and services. Now, the tracer methodology looks at the care and services provided to specific, individual patients.

The patients selected can be currently receiving services in any medical center setting including the emergency room, an inpatient unit, an outpatient clinic or a domiciliary. A selected patient could also be receiving services in their home.

In order to prepare the staff for what to expect during a JCAHO survey, a specially trained tracer team visits the locations where the veteran received or is receiving care. For example, a tracer period may start when a patient was seen in a specialty clinic. The patient was scheduled for surgery, had a preoperative work-up in the coordinated outpatient testing center, was prepared for surgery in the ambulatory procedure center, had surgery in the operating room, recovered in the post anesthesia care unit and is currently continuing recovery on an inpatient unit.

The tracer team members visit all of these areas and interview both the staff that actually provided care/services and the patient if possible. The team visits areas such as the pharmacy, radiology or the laboratory if those services were received.

Interview questions address the appropriateness and timeliness of the care, the communication among members of the health care team and the documentation of the care provided. The environment is also examined for cleanliness and safety.

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Improvement opportunities are identified and discussed with the staff. Tracers will be used as an internal tool in improving the care and services the medical center staff provides.

### ***Reclaiming Our Heritage***

The Milwaukee VAMC will be inviting high VA officials to Reclaiming Our Heritage, including the Secretary, Deputy Secretary and the Under Secretary for Health.

The Milwaukee VA Medical Center - one of the original three VA's, authorized by legislation signed by President Abraham Lincoln -- hosts an annual event called Reclaiming Our Heritage the first weekend in June. The fourth annual Reclaiming Our Heritage will be held June 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005 in the Soldiers Home Historic District on the medical center grounds. This event honors veterans and educates the public about veterans' contributions to and sacrifices for American society. Reclaiming Our Heritage is a living history event, with reenactments and encampments from all the major military eras in U. S. History, starting with the Revolutionary War up to the present era. Sunday, June 5<sup>th</sup> has been set aside to honor veterans of the Korean conflict.

This year's event will also pay special tribute to returning OIF/OEF soldiers.

### **NORTH CHICAGO**

#### ***VA Staff Help DoD Prepare for Returning Soldiers***

It was good fortune that Captain Maria Bates of the Wuerzburg MEDDAC and Dr. Steven Silver a VA psychologist at the Coatesville VAMC met at a training session for therapists treating the psychological effects of trauma. Dr. Silver was teaching Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), a method of psycho-therapy listed in the recently published VA/DoD guidelines as an effective treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Captain Bates, a social worker, was part of the team preparing for the rotation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry to their home base in Wuerzburg,

Germany. Realizing that the treatment would provide a way to help returning soldiers and their families, Captain Bates discussed it with Dr. Silver and her Chief of Social Work, Lieutenant Colonel Gary Trynieszewski, who heartily agreed. The training was arranged.

The result was another positive step of VA and DoD sharing resources and knowledge, this time in the form of a four-day seminar in Wuerzburg for the psychotherapists. The training was conducted by Drs. Silver and Susan Rogers from the PTSD program at Coatesville VAMC, Dr. Jamie Zabukovec from the Prescott VAMC and Dr. Howard Lipke from the North Chicago VAMC, all experienced in PTSD treatment and in EMDR training. The VA staff flew to Germany on Monday, December 27<sup>th</sup> and returned on New Years Eve. The VA group worked with 30 Army and DoD therapists preparing for their combat forces return from Iraq. Accordingly to Dr. Lipke, the training team agreed that the Army/DoD therapists were as an adept and highly motivated group as they had ever worked with.

As part of the program, participants worked with each other in small groups under supervision of the staff and used their own past experiences as targets for training with this method. So the therapists are learning by being both the therapist and client role for each other. One of the extra benefits of the training was that one of the therapists worked on a traumatic experience from his deployment in the war zone. He gained insight, and found that event less disturbing during the course of his training and practice experience.

The Wuerzburg EMDR training is one of several conducted by members of this team, as well as with support from other VA and even private sector EMDR teachers, working through a not for profit organization called EMDR Humanitarian Assistance Programs (HAP). Training and on going consultation, which has been provided at Colorado Springs at the Army Community Hospital and the one in Bremerton, Washington are completed.

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In discussing the training and the mental health situation for returning combatants, Dr. Lipke noted that the preliminary indication from research is that returning veterans from Iraq and Afghan, like veterans of other wars regardless of how well they have performed, will sometimes have events stuck in their minds not as a memory of the past, but rather in a way that makes them sometimes feel as if the combat is still occurring. Dr. Lipke states, "The therapy that was taught in Germany has been demonstrated to be effective in helping many survivors of war and other trauma, mentally digest the events so that they are memories not flashbacks or repetitious nightmares." Dr. Lipke goes on to say, "EMDR treatment as well as other counseling techniques can also help with the destructive anger and psychological numbness that often also accompany return from combat. Not everyone has these problems, different people have different responses. However, ironically enough, on the average for those who have them the strongest and longest, it appears to be because they take these painful experiences as signs of weakness, not a natural reaction to extreme stress." He concludes by saying, "Rather than deal with them through self acceptance, increased social support and counseling, they try to avoid the problem and make it go away by pretending they don't have it, and thereby keep it."

After returning from Germany, Dr. Lipke conducted a training session at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center for 12 counselors. Helping Dr. Lipke with the training were Drs. Shelia Perrin and John Schout from NCVAMC and Dr. Edith Tabor and Jim Moore, MSW, both retired NCVAMC employees.



*Dr. Lipke on the right during a training session when in Germany.*

This is another example of how VA and DoD are collaborating to help both working active duty military and veterans.

Congratulations, to the entire VA group for stepping up when called upon!!!

### ***Black History Program***



Several activities were held during February in recognition of Black History Month. The North Chicago High School Spirit Team performed for veterans and staff at the Black Youth of Tomorrow celebration on February 25.

### **TOMAH**

#### ***VITA Program at Tomah VA***

The VA Medical Center in Tomah opened its new Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, or "VITA," Program on Saturday, February 12.

Tomah's VITA program is unique in that it was organized and is staffed **entirely** with volunteers. Keith Garrett and Dale Pohlman are the Site Coordinators. New to the world of VA volunteering and VITA, they made contacts with the IRS, studied the manuals, coordinated the donation of computers for the program, developed a training program for the tax preparing volunteers, and now oversee the operation of the entire program, including the completion of quality control checks on all tax returns. Five additional volunteers prepare taxes and two serve as receptionists for the program.

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The Tomah VITA Site is the second VITA program in VISN 12; Milwaukee has the other program.

VITA Programs are sponsored by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) nationwide. The VITA Program at the Tomah VA offers free tax help to qualifying veterans, Tomah VA staff and volunteers. Individuals interested in receiving tax help call the VITA Desk and leave a message on the voice mail. A VITA volunteer contacts the potential clients to determine their eligibility for the VITA service and to schedule an appointment.

In the first three weeks of the program's operation, over twenty individuals received help with their taxes. The IRS initially indicated a total of 35 returns in the first tax season would qualify the program "a success." The Tomah VA VITA Program is well on its way to exceeding expectations.



*Pat Flanders, left, a VITA Tax Preparer, assists VA employee Debbie Thorpe with her tax return.*

## **VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION**

The 2005 edition of *Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents* is now available on line. It is an 840 KB PDF that requires Adobe Acrobat (4.0 or later) or other PDF viewer. It can be accessed by going to [http://www1.va.gov/opa/vadocs/current\\_benefits.htm](http://www1.va.gov/opa/vadocs/current_benefits.htm)

The Spanish language version, *Beneficios Federales para los Veteranos y sus Dependientes*, will be available from the same location as soon as the translation is completed.

## **VA & RETURNING OIF-OEF VETS**

During a recent visit to the Augusta VAMC, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Health, Dr. Michael Kussman, visited with veterans who recently returned from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.



*Dr. Kussman meets with troops in day room.*



*Dr. Kussman lends encouraging words to veteran during his rehabilitation.*



# *National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans*



Balloons and greetings were delivered to patients at the **Iron Mountain VAMC** during National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans Week. Janice M. Boss, Medical Center Director, presents a special pin, along with other gifts, to Bill Mellon, a nursing home care unit resident. Each year, hundreds of Valentines are sent to VA facilities to bring cheer to veterans and to recognize them for the sacrifices they made for our country. National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans also offers citizens an opportunity to share time with veterans and to explore volunteer opportunities.



Barry Jones (center), representing all of the veterans served at the **Jesse Brown VA Medical Center**, is flanked by Associate Director Michelle Blakely and David LeBreton, Constituent Service Agent for Veterans Affairs for Senator Barack Obama, as the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center kicked off its traditional opening ceremony for the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans.



The NA KUPUNA UKULELE Club of Chicago performed for veterans at **North Chicago VAMC** as part of National Salute Week.

Many from this group were members of the 442nd Regional Combat Team serving in the Army in Italy during WWII. This unit is the most highly decorated unit of its size.

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The Brownies from Lake Forest came with goodies and prizes to sponsor and run a Bingo for the veterans in the Nursing Home at **North Chicago** as part of National Salute Week.

While many VA facilities observe the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans with a one-time open house or activity, the **Tomah VAMC** has provided its patients with a full week of activities for many years.

The week is kicked off with a huge bingo game sponsored by the American Legion Posts of Sauk County, Wisconsin. Other activities include the annual Veterans Arts and Crafts Exhibit and Competition, a bowling tournament sponsored by the Disabled American Veterans, Canteen Book distribution by the Ladies Auxiliary of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a Valentine's Dance, visits by Little Miss and Junior Little Miss Tomah and the Cranberry Royalty, performances by the high school show choirs, a visit by the Chamber of Commerce's Ambassador's group, and much more.



Sue Brueggeman, Food Service Cook, once again baked and decorated the annual Valentines Cake. The cake is baked in pans specially made for National Salute in the Tomah VA's metal shop over twenty years ago. Each year, Sue creates a new design.



A very special visitor to the Tomah VA was 2005 Miss Wisconsin, Molly McGrath, from Wisconsin Rapids. Miss Wisconsin visited some patients on the acute medical ward, and also assisted with the presentation at the Arts and Crafts Awards Ceremony.

## **Care Coordination Home Telehealth: No Decision About Me, Without Me, Right Care, Right Time, Right Place**

In October 2004 VISN 12 launched a new initiative with the VHA Office of Care Coordination to provide care to our veteran population with the use of technology while following into set programs in all seven medical centers in the areas of mental health, primary care, home based primary care, and spinal cord injury programs with direct allowance as to not have a break in the continuity of care to that veteran.

The care coordination program is going to raise the bar to help VHA meet the challenges of delivering care to veterans at both ends of the age spectrum. The VISN will be launching an effort to enroll over 500 patients by October 1 with a continued future effort to enroll an additional 500 patients by December 31.

Access to services for elder veterans with chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart failure and post-traumatic stress syndrome are improved by care coordination and the emphasis on the home as the preferred place of care.

Telehealth in the form of real-time videoconferencing is of benefit to veterans returning from combat in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom; these veterans can receive care close to home in community based outpatient clinics (CBOC's) and local medical centers instead of having to remain in large specialty centers.

VHA's strategic approaches to the care of the elderly, those with mental illness and those with both problems of aging and mental illness are presenting challenges that are eminently suitable to care coordination.

VHA's definition of care coordination is "the wider application of care and case management principles to the delivery of health care services using health informatics, disease management and telehealth technologies to facilitate access health of

designated individuals and populations with the intent of providing the right care in the right place at the right time." This marriage of telehealth, health informatics and disease management with care and case management enables clinicians to reengineer the care they deliver around these technologies.

Raising the bar means that, as always when it comes to performance, the devil is in the details. The details in question being the clinical, technical and business challenges that delivering robust sustainable services presents.

Finally, as always in the VHA, training is integral to the success of this program and the VHA Care Coordination & Telehealth.

## **VA RESEARCH**

### ***What is the VA doing for Parkinson's Disease Patients?***

In 2001, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) created six Parkinson's Disease, Research, Education and Clinical Centers (PADRECCs) in an effort to improve care for veterans with Parkinson's Disease (PD) and other movement disorders. The Centers are located in Portland/Seattle, San Francisco, West Los Angeles, Houston, Richmond, and Philadelphia. Our specialty centers are composed of internationally known neurologists, neurosurgeons, nurses, researchers and educators who are experts in Parkinson's Disease care.

PD is a neurological disorder or disorder of the brain. Symptoms often include tremor that occurs during rest, limbs that are stiff, gait or balance problems, and slowness of movement. Although the exact cause of PD is unknown, it is linked to a chemical in the brain called dopamine. Dopamine plays a crucial role in producing smooth, controlled movements of the body. Today PD affects as many as 1.5 million Americans, and notable personalities such as Michael J. Fox, Mohamed Ali and Janet Reno have been affected by this life-altering disease.

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The PADRECCs have three missions:

**Clinical Care & Treatment**, we provide comprehensive patient care by addressing every aspect of PD. Our Parkinson's Disease treatment team provides a thorough assessment of symptoms, mental health issues, rehabilitative concerns, medication management and surgical options.

**Education & Support**, through educational program and materials, it is our mission to raise PD awareness across the United States. Our centers offer educational opportunities for patients, family members, healthcare providers, and the general public. Support groups and community outreach programs also play an important role in our educational mission.

**Research & Discovery**, the key to discovering new ways to control or delay PD is by testing new therapies. We are dedicated to developing new treatments that control the symptoms of PD and find its cure.

A new component of the PADRECC is the National VA Parkinson's Disease Consortium. The Consortium was established by the VHA's National Neurology Director in an effort to magnify the impact of the PADRECCs. This program is designed to complement the PADRECCs in their mission to reach and serve the approximately 60,000 veterans diagnosed with PD. The Consortium was developed to network nationally dispersed VA clinicians who possess expertise or interest in PD related fields. Members include movement disorder specialists, neurologists, geriatricians, primary care providers, and multidisciplinary clinicians.

## ***Fish Oil Holds Promise in Alzheimer's Fight***

Even our grandmothers told us fish was "brain food"—and now scientists have evidence to back the claim.

Researchers with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) found that a diet high in docosahexenoic acid, or DHA—an omega-3 fatty acid found in relatively high concentrations in cold-water fish—dramatically slowed the progression of Alzheimer's disease in mice. Specifically, DHA cut the harmful brain plaques that mark the disease. The results appear in the March 23 online edition of the *Journal of Neuroscience*.

Senior author Greg M. Cole, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at the Greater Los Angeles VA Healthcare System and UCLA, said that unlike many studies with mice, this one points to the benefits of a therapy that is easily available and already touted for other medical conditions. DHA—either from food sources such as fish and soy, or in fish-oil supplements—is recommended by many cardiologists for heart health, based on scores of previous studies.

"The good news from this study is that we can buy the therapy at a supermarket or drug store," said Cole. "DHA has a tremendous safety profile—essentially no side effects—and clinical trial evidence supports giving DHA supplements to people at risk for cardiovascular disease."

The new study involved older mice genetically altered to develop Alzheimer's disease. The researchers fed one group of the mice DHA-fortified chow. The control mice ate a normal or DHA-depleted diet. After three to five months—the equivalent of several years in human biology—the high-DHA group had 70-percent less buildup of amyloid protein in the brain. This sticky protein makes up the plaques, or patches, that are a hallmark of Alzheimer's.

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A similar study by Cole's group published in *Neuron* last fall showed that DHA protected against damage to the "synaptic" areas where brain cells communicate and enabled mice to perform better on memory tests. The studies, say the scientists, suggest that even people who are genetically predisposed to the disease may be able to delay it by boosting their DHA intake.

Omega-3 fatty acids, typically deficient in the American diet, are essential for human health. DHA in particular is vital to proper brain function, as well as eye health and other body processes. In recent years epidemiologists have tied fish-rich diets to a lower incidence of Alzheimer's disease and homed in on DHA as the preventive factor. Omega-3 fatty acid supplements are now being

tested in clinical trials with early-stage Alzheimer's patients in the United States, Canada and Sweden to see if the therapy really slows the disease.

Food sources of omega-3 fatty acids include fish such as salmon, halibut, mackerel and sardines, as well as almonds, walnuts, soy, and DHA-enriched eggs. Concerns about mercury contamination in fish have helped popularize purified DHA supplements based on fish oil or algae.

Last year, Cole's team identified another nutrient that appears to combat Alzheimer's plaques in mice: curcumin, the yellow pigment in turmeric, one of the spices that make up curry powder. Researchers became interested in curcumin's potential to prevent or treat Alzheimer's disease after noting the low prevalence of dementia among the elderly in India, where curry is a staple.

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

The Great Lakes News is published for employees and stakeholders in the VA Great Lakes Health Care System. Submissions can be sent to [Linda.deraad@med.va.gov](mailto:Linda.deraad@med.va.gov). Electronic subscriptions are available through our web site at <http://www.VAGreatLakes.org>.

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